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Portfolio process differs according to learners' purposes, audience, ownership, and the teacher's philosophical views of learning and evaluation. In a yearlong investigation of portfolio process, the teacher-researchers developed their own portfolios along with their students. This instructional resource illustrates a multi-purposed, multiple process view of portfolio assessment and suggests decision making that accompanies eight elements of portfolio process--questions, purpose, audience, expectations, collection, selection, organization, and reflection. Teachers are encouraged to develop their own portfolios along with their students as a way to model the process, reflect upon their teaching practices, and support students' ongoing learning. Contains 18 references and additional resources. (Author/RS)

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT PORTFOLIO PROCESSES

**Ronald D. Kieffer  
Mark A. Faust  
Linda Simpson Morrison  
Cheryl Hilderbrand**

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National Reading Research Center Summer 1996

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National Reading Research Center

**Questions about  
Portfolio Processes**

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## Questions about Portfolio Processes

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**Abstract.** *Portfolio process differs according to learners' purposes, audience, ownership, and the teacher's philosophical views of learning and evaluation. In our yearlong investigation of portfolio process, we developed our own portfolios along with our students. In this resource, we illustrate a multi-purposed, multiple process view of portfolio assessment and suggest decision making that accompanies eight elements of portfolio process—questions, purpose, audience, expectations, collection, selection, organization, and reflection. We encourage teachers to develop their own portfolios along with their students as a way to model the process, reflect upon their teaching practices, and support students' ongoing learning.*

I think that creating a portfolio is a really creative act and it's something that starts taking on a life of its own. That's what any kind of piece of art does. It takes on a life of its own. And it uses all of the language arts, reading, writing, thinking, processing, and bringing things together in a way that creates something new almost. I think it is a process, but I think it is a process that changes, that's hard to define. I really do think it can be a way for teachers to change and become better teachers because it really changes the focus of what we do in the classroom. (Cheryl Hilderbrand, High School English Teacher, March 11, 1994)

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Cheryl expressed an idea that is rarely discussed in writings about portfolios, that is, creating a portfolio is a process. Furthermore, she suggests that creating a portfolio is a process that changes. We support the notion that portfolio assessment is a process that is ongoing, flexible, nonlinear, multidimensional, and hard to define.

We have explored portfolio process for one year by developing our own portfolios along with our students. In this resource, we will clarify the concept by describing eight aspects or elements (questions, purpose, audience, expectations, collection, selection, organization, reflection) that can aid teachers as they move forward into portfolio assessment. Since we support a multipurposed, multiple process view to portfolio evaluation in schools, we will suggest some decision making that accompanies these elements without providing a single-minded perspective.

### **Rationale**

Teachers and students in school classrooms have used portfolios in a variety of ways. Portfolios have been characterized as reliable assessments that are tools for teachers and students to document evidence of learning and progress toward curricular goals. Portfolios create contexts where teachers learn more about their students, enabling them to provide responses that promote individual growth. They also are portraits, stories, or histories of students as literate persons. Portfolios differ according to their

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specific purposes, who owns the process, what audience it is directed to, and the teacher's philosophical views of learning and evaluation.

We have found that doing our own teacher portfolios has offered us ways to model the learning process so students can learn how to see themselves as learners engaged in similar processes. Portfolios can be used to foster teachers' self-knowledge about past and current teacher and learner practices. They also enable teachers and students to focus on change in ways that support learning.

There are multiple possibilities for implementing portfolios depending upon the circumstances of each class. We are not suggesting a particular way of using portfolios, but are attempting to identify the kinds of questions that can be asked in the form of curricular decisions. We believe that portfolios can help teachers transform their classrooms into more coherent and supportive learning environments when they think about the concept of portfolio as a process, create portfolios of their own as ways to learn about the process over time, and include their students as responsible learning partners within the social context of the classroom community. Therefore, we offer eight aspects of the portfolio process for teachers and students to consider.

#### *Questions*

The process of creating a portfolio, as we see it, begins with questions about purpose and audience,

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questions about what students are learning and why: What did we experience? What did we learn? What is the value of what we learned? Why did we learn what we learned? What will we do next? For what particular purpose are we creating this portfolio? What audience will view this portfolio?

Without initially realizing the importance of questions to portfolio process, Linda, a second-grade teacher, spent time thinking about her own portfolio and asking key questions to guide her creation.

Well, I did have a chance today to do a little reflection, and it occurred to me that I would probably be wise just to focus on one thing and try to represent myself as a teacher, or as a learner. Trying to do a whole life portfolio, how could I ever have the time to do that? And I thought, well, for what purpose am I doing this? I could be doing it just for personal satisfaction, just for the enjoyment of gathering items and thinking about them. What else could I be doing it for? For research? So, a lot of it depends on what is the purpose? Why do this? And that's something I have to think about pretty carefully. (12/23/93)

As students and teachers begin to reflect upon what is happening in their classroom, questions about learning lead to questions about the physical portfolio object: What expectations do students and teachers have about portfolios? What happens during the collection period? How will learners select and arrange evidence of their learning? What is the role of reflection

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in the portfolio process? We have found that questions about the physical portfolio object are premature if not preceded by questions about learning and evaluation.

*Purpose*

The portfolio begins to take shape as learners select and arrange evidence of their learning with a particular purpose and a particular audience in mind. Cheryl considered this carefully when implementing portfolios in her high school English class.

What's been informing my teaching is the knowledge that [the students are] going to have to prove what they learned and therefore, I have to make sure that they've learned something. So we're going to talk about the need for evaluation, what would be a good way to do that. We're going to talk about evaluation, and we're going to talk about audience and purpose. Then we're going to look at what we have done and get in groups and then make a big list of what the semester has included from the music that we've listened to, the museums that we've visited, paintings that have meant things, responses and formal writing, informal writing, and reading. And then, from that, negotiate from them. But the purpose, I think, is most important. What have I learned, and how can I share with someone what I've learned? And how have I grown as a student? (12/14/93)

By connecting the portfolios to learning, Cheryl suggests that portfolios can serve multiple purposes

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including tools to judge progress, vehicles for response, and narrative accounts of students as readers, writers, and thinkers. She is interested in helping her students examine their growth over time. Generating a narrative account of learning gives learners the opportunity to look back and discover new truths about themselves. Responding to learners in genuine ways can allow the chance for students to look ahead. The purposes of responding and accounting complement each other by helping learners recount experiences and make connections through journal writing, conferences, reflection, and self-evaluation. As students look back at their learning, they position themselves to look forward toward future goals.

#### *Audience*

Those who are given ownership of their portfolios benefit from chances to show what they have accomplished in the past and what they are capable of doing in the present and future. They benefit from self-reflection and self-awareness as well as from giving meaningful responses to others and receiving such responses to their own reading and writing. Portfolios offer a place for students to gather a variety of responses (support, celebration, questions, comments, criticisms) from a variety of sources (peers, teachers, parents, self, and other audiences) satisfying the need to communicate to others or themselves either orally or through written reflections.

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The public audience, classmates, future employers, admissions agents at a college/university, and so forth, and the private one serving primarily oneself sometimes conflict with each other. Linda has struggled with this issue.

I was thinking about audience for the teacher portfolio, and obviously there's a professional audience for the information about it. But your own personal portfolio, who is the audience beyond yourself? And what parts of it would lend themselves to being shared professionally? Would it be understood? What parts would be meaningful?  
(5/24/94)

Linda prefers to share her portfolio with a few friends and colleagues rather than a larger audience. Teachers need to give their students these kinds of choices as well.

### *Expectations*

The student and teacher negotiate the logic of the portfolio. Initial expectations are often open-ended to foster student choice, ownership, and self-evaluation, but teachers need not be isolated from the portfolio process. They can serve as collaborative partners who help students select items, respond in ways that help learners pursue goals, and support the gathering of students' stories. Rief (1992) writes about external criteria (the teacher agenda) and internal criteria (student's choices of pieces for their own reasons).

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Students retain ownership by determining their internal criteria, but teachers can set some external criteria by collaborating with students to decide when and to what extent work will be revised, reworked, and evaluated, by providing responses to students' ideas, and by promoting students' self-evaluations of process and product. Cheryl realizes the importance of negotiation when setting expectations.

I want to negotiate with them. We want to talk about purposes of portfolio. I hope they will see it as a learning thing, a self-evaluation of what they've done and where they've been. And we'll talk a lot about what the purposes are and how we can achieve these purposes, and then we will, together, set criteria about what will be included and I will say that there must be a rationale for the things that are included and maybe some kind of introduction. (10/5/93)

Cheryl has allowed for both internal and external criteria. The setting of expectations is meant to be a collaborative act with multiple voices working together to set goals.

#### *Collection*

Initially, the portfolio is a collection of student work that grows into a representation of the individual as a learner. Collection is an ongoing process as students find and create new items. Linda helps her second

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graders collect portfolio items from their process folders at the end of the first grading period.

I'm still trying to come up with a way to make that something that's more central to the classroom in terms of the kids seeing the value in collecting things so that you can get a picture of yourself. And I think as we get closer to the end of this first quarter, there will be opportunities to do that because they will have some things collected . . . . It's just a way for me to get them to look at what they're doing and decide what needs to be kept. What should I collect? What should I put aside? The last time that we did work together on deciding what to put in the portfolio, I think I said something like, "You might want to look for your very best piece from this week, or you might want to look for your favorite piece." (10/5/93)

In Linda's classroom, students' collections are related to certain purposes or concerns (e.g., best piece, favorite piece). As the purposes change, so will the need to periodically collect new portfolio items from created works.

### *Selection*

The portfolio is not a place for everything that is created or collected by the students. It contains selected pieces for multiple reasons or purposes such as pivotal pieces (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991), ones that have had a great impact on someone's learning, process pieces including drafts, showcase pieces,

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satisfying and unsatisfying pieces, memories and mementos, goals and celebrations. A critical aspect of the portfolio process resides in the owners' selections of pieces that represent themselves as learners.

Selection involves both narrowing from a wide array of items to broadening so that the final form represents the whole person. Linda used modeling to get that idea across to her second graders.

The focus right now is on getting the kids to start creating portfolios and getting them to see it as more than just a collection of good papers. So, I modeled selecting something to put in my portfolio from some of the things that I have written recently, and just sort of talked through the process that I went through as I made my decision. And the piece that I chose was a story that I wrote about my brothers. (10/5/93)

Linda's own portfolio helped her to work through the portfolio process with her students. She did not assume that her students could naturally select items for their portfolios. Instead, she demonstrated the idea by thinking about it aloud so that her students could then practice selection over time.

#### *Organization*

When organization becomes a critical issue, it can be a major obstacle for portfolio creators. Focusing one's purpose in a format that makes sense to the

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owner is a very difficult concept to think about and implement as Cheryl points out.

Well, from the beginning, what I have been most interested in is the idea I'd have to focus this. It just seems totally overwhelming to try to include everything in one organized thing. And I'm really more interested right now in what I started out doing from the beginning—keeping a record and a journal of what I observe after I go through this process, and what I observed going on in the classroom, and my reflections on what seems to be happening to me as the teacher when I make these changes. That's what I think the portfolio should focus on. That's what I want to focus on. And that's what I have—mostly writings, but some records of things that I have done, and some things that are just a natural part of the process as you change as a teacher. But I can see thinking about portfolio as assessment and evaluation has changed, made my teaching different, and I think better, and I think I would like to do a portfolio that reflects that. (12/14/93)

Cheryl realizes that learners use different ways of organizing portfolios to support certain purposes. A showcase portfolio, one with exemplary pieces of work, could serve the judging purpose. A process portfolio, one that shows growth over time, allows teacher and peer response. A literacy portfolio (Hansen, 1992) builds a picture or story of one's life as a continual learner. A composing portfolio supports the reading, writing, listening, and speaking connection, and an

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Integrated portfolio connects learning across content areas. For some, the portfolio follows life themes as it becomes a part of each creator's world outside of the classroom, something that they plan to continue adding to over time. The idea of a "layered" portfolio is a portfolio that deliberately targets more than one audience (e.g., stakeholders in the evaluation process—including self as audience). These different ways of organizing the portfolio ultimately relate back to portfolio authors' purposes, audience, collection, and selection.

### *Reflection*

Students use portfolios to enhance their meaning making. When a student composes oral and written reflections exploring the meaning of portfolio items, a mere collection of selected items is transformed into a potentially powerful document representing that student as a self-aware learner.

In order to grow and be ready for these profound experiences and be open to them, you have to have established the process of self-evaluation and looking at yourself—where am I and what am I doing, and maybe that's the most important part of portfolio, getting back to reflection, but where you are aware of here is where I am and here is where I want to go, because some people go through their life just totally unaware that they can make any changes in themselves. (Cheryl, 12/14/93)

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For Cheryl, and the rest of us, reflection is the core of the portfolio process. Without it, a portfolio would merely be a scrapbook of items.

We believe that a thoughtful combination of collection, selection, and reflection of worthwhile learning experiences constitutes a highly flexible and multidimensional strategy for helping learners participate in documenting and evaluating their own learning. Through reflection, the students are going public with their individual responses, explaining their selections, documenting memories, and exploring other possibilities about reading, writing, and thinking. They consider the processes involved in creating a work, set lifelong learning goals, self-evaluate, and discover profound realizations about growth and change. These reflections enhance students' experiences and validate the continuation of their learning. Perhaps the greatest value of portfolios is situated in their use to document and reflect upon change.

#### **An Invitation**

Looking back at our own creations, we see unfinished portfolios and understand that the portfolio process supports and informs ongoing learning. Portfolios create purposeful opportunities for us as learners to feel a sense of personal investment in reading and writing processes, creating lasting impacts on our lives. Portfolios help us realize how and why our teaching practices have evolved in certain directions, and they enhance our ability as teachers to make life-affirming

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decisions in our relations with our students. Most importantly, our portfolios have reminded us that we, as teachers, learn best by exploring the same experiences as our students.

We would like to extend an invitation to those who are interested in portfolio process to develop their own portfolios along with their students or colleagues. These portfolios could be reflections of past learning, reflections of teaching, ways to model processes with students, or ways of looking to the future. As you share your portfolios with others, your conversations will enhance your understanding of multiple portfolio purposes and processes and help create a vision for further exploration into the connections between portfolios and learning.

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